

*Maria Edelson*

**"MANY EYES WERE LOOKING"; IMAGES OF VISUAL PERCEPTION  
IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S FICTION**

As a writer of fiction Joseph Conrad considered it very important that his imaginary world should be presented in most accurate and evocative terms which would give his readers a sense of experiencing reality. In the preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* he says:

My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you see<sup>1</sup>

The emphasis which Conrad puts on making his readers see is in keeping with the fact that he himself and many of his characters appear to look carefully at the reality they deal with in order to see its hidden truth. The sheer accumulation of references made in his writings to looking, watching, observing, to glances, gazes, and to eyes generally, produces significant literary effects and meanings.

*Lord Jim* may serve as a most telling example of this tendency; the novel seems to be full of watchful eyes. The very first sentence of the book contains a mention of Jim's "fixed from-under stare"<sup>2</sup>. The sentence constitutes a part of Conrad's description of Jim's appearance corresponding to his inner characteristics and a state of mind. The way characters look at one another and observe others looking and seeing may often represent a very complex situation in which there is much more than meets the eye. For example the passage in which Jim mistakes a remark made about a dog for a sneer directed at himself, not only provides an inkling of Jim's

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<sup>1</sup> J. Conrad, *Preface* [in:] id., *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth 1975, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> J. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth 1969, p. 9.

feelings which he refused to admit to, but it also conveys the probing, questioning attitude of Marlow, who wishes to find out the truth about the young man. Marlow reports the incident emphasizing the intensity of the eye contact between the two men:

[...] the man, raising his voice a little, said with a slow laugh, 'Look at that wretched cur', [...] I saw Jim spin around. He made a step forward and barred my way. We were alone; he glared at me with an air of stubborn resolution. [...] 'Did you speak to me?' asked Jim [...] I watched him [...] 'Some mistake,' I protested, utterly at a loss, and never taking my eyes off him. To watch his face was like watching a darkening sky before a clap of thunder [...] 'What did you mean by staring at me all the morning?' said Jim at last. He looked up and looked down again. 'Did you expect us all to sit with downcast eyes out of regard for your susceptibilities?' I retorted sharply. I was not going to submit meekly to any of his nonsense. He raised his eyes again, and this time continued to look me straight in the face<sup>3</sup>.

And in the final scene of the novel, just before he dies, Jim sends right and left a proud and unflinching glance, he looks Doramin straight in the face when the latter shoots him through the chest; it is his eyes that reveal his determination not to give up his dream of glory. Marlow, who has watched Jim so attentively throughout the novel, makes a guess that "it may very well be that in the short moment of his proud and unflinching glance, he had beheld the face of that opportunity which, like an Eastern bride, had come to his side"<sup>4</sup>. Jim's preoccupation with dreams of heroism and his frequent looking towards the dreams rather than at the immediate physical reality has been suggested also earlier in the novel. Both literally and metaphorically Jim strains his eyesight to see the invisible. Marlow makes the following comment about it:

I could see in his glance darted into the night all his inner being carried on, projected headlong into the fanciful realm of recklessly heroic aspirations. [...] He was very far away from me who watched him across three feet of space<sup>5</sup>.

If Jim has an ability to see more than ordinary people, he sees less at the same time since "his eyes roaming about the line of the horizon, seemed to gaze hungrily into the unattainable, and did not see the shadow of the coming event"<sup>6</sup>.

Marlow's friend Stein diagnoses Jim as romantic, but, in varying degree, romantic dreaming which prevents one from seeing reality fully, must be regarded as part of human nature in general. Deliberately limited seeing creates illusions about life. Marlow realizes it during "a moment of vision" he experiences while talking to the French officer. He muses:

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58, 59.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 313.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

It's extraordinary how we go through life with eyes shut, with dull ears, with dormant thoughts. Perhaps it's just as well<sup>7</sup>.

Stein confirms the power of delusion once again in terms of seeing and not seeing. According to him man "wants to be a saint, and wants to be a devil – and every time he shuts his eyes he sees himself as a very fine fellow – so fine as he can never be. [...] And because you not always can keep your eyes shut there comes the real trouble – the heart pain – the world pain"<sup>8</sup>. Delusion about the nature of life and of man appears to be one of the major themes of *Lord Jim*. It is also a principal motif of *Heart of Darkness*. Kurtz's sketch in oil depicting a blindfolded woman carrying a lighted torch represents allegorically spiritual blindness as well as frequently deliberate turning a blind eye to reality. One may delude oneself, as Stein tells us in *Lord Jim*, by assuming most extreme and often contradictory roles: Kurtz, unable "to be a saint" seemed to have decided "to be a devil" and may have thought himself "a very fine fellow" indeed until he saw the unbearable vision of darkness that he had not been able to oppose.

A rather different example of vision of horror brought about by the blindness of self-delusion is to be found in the case of the chief engineer of the *Patna* who maintains that he saw the ship's masthead lights disappear at the moment of its sinking which, as we know very well, did not take place in fact. Ironically, he boasts of excellent eyesight which allows him to see more than other people do and later, indeed, driven by guilt to excessive drinking and madness, he is tormented by visions of pink toads that nobody else can see. When Marlow visits the chief at the hospital, he sees "a hint of spectral alarm that lurked in the blank glitter of his glance, resembling a nondescript form of a terror crouching silently behind a pane of glass"<sup>9</sup>. The terror conveyed through the seemingly incoherent raving of the chief is very real:

They turned me out of my bunk in the middle watch to look at her sinking, [...] Only my eyes were good enough to see. I am famous for my eyesight. [...] I tell you there are no such eyes as mine this side of the Persian Gulf. Look under the bed. [...] 'What can you see?' he asked. 'Nothing' I said, feeling awfully ashamed of myself. He scrutinized my face with wild and withering contempt. 'Just so,' he said, 'but if I were to look I could see – there's no eyes like mine [...] Millions of pink toads. There's no eyes like mine. Millions of pink toads It's worse than seeing a ship sink [...]. The ship was full of them. They've got to be watched, you know. [...] All pink. All pink – as big as mastiffs, with an eye on top of the head' [...] and while I looked down, the spectral horror in him broke through his glassy gaze<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162, 163.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45, 46.

The difference between Jim's illusions and the self-deception of the chief engineer or the self-delusion of people like Kurtz lies in the fact that Jim has his visions of the ideal and a set of instinctively adopted values to which he obstinately tries to be faithful while the others have either lost theirs or have never had any.

Inability to see reality may come from within, as when characters refuse to accept what really is, or from without when they are prevented from seeing by darkness or, rather, all they see is darkness. An interesting example of such a situation will be found in *Lord Jim* in the young man's description of the scene after his fatal jump from the *Patna*:

You couldn't distinguish the sea from the sky; there was nothing to see and nothing to hear. Not a glimpse, not a shape, not a sound<sup>11</sup>. [...]

It was just dark enough, too. We were like men walled up in a grave. No concern with anything on earth. Nobody to pass an opinion. Nothing mattered<sup>12</sup>.

Physically experienced darkness associates with spiritual and moral sense of chaos, loss of meaning and value in the face of prevailing nothingness from which any "field of reference" is totally absent.

The "wall of darkness" experienced by the young captain in *The Shadow Line* creates similar effects. The captain notes:

Such must have been the darkness before the creation. It had closed behind me. I knew I was invisible to the man at the helm. Neither could I see anything. He was alone. I was alone, every man was alone where he stood. And every form was gone too [...] everything was blotted out in the dreadful smoothness of that absolute night<sup>13</sup>.

The passage emphasizes the fact of utter loneliness of man in confrontation with darkness. It also brings the reader closer to understanding the nature of darkness in Conrad's writings; it appears to be a negation of moral order or any order, for that matter. As a symbol, darkness points to the absence of any **given** meaningful order of the universe and to the destructive effect nothingness can have on human beings. In Conrad's fiction one is left alone, without any authoritative guidance and has to create one's own meaningful order of things based on a few simple, instinctive notions such as sense of duty or fidelity. And it is fidelity to the simple moral code that prevents darkness from spreading. As Marlow puts it:

[...] the tremendous disdain of the Dark Powers whose real terrors, always on the verge of triumph, are perpetually foiled by the steadfastness of man<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90, 91.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>13</sup> J. Conrad, *The Shadow Line. A Confession*, ed. L. Conrad, Paris 1919, p. 208.

<sup>14</sup> J. Conrad, *Lord Jim...*, p. 96.

There are two attitudes to darkness which Conrad presents in favourable light: one is best represented by Jim and the young Marlow of "Youth" whose enthusiastic illusions of glory do not allow them to see the darker aspect of life, and the other depends on mature confrontation with darkness and looking reality straight in the face so that the truth about it can be known. Conrad seems to be indulgent and somewhat envious about the former, but he fully supports and respects the latter.

Getting to know reality means getting to know people and so Conrad's Marlow looks at them searchingly, questioningly, attentively. He keeps Jim under observation from the moment when he sees him in the court. He says: "My eyes met his for the first time at the inquiry"<sup>15</sup>. And at that point he begins his private inquiry which lasts throughout the novel. We are made aware of his ceaseless observation of Jim and of other people by frequent comments such as: "I was looking at him from the shade" (p. 33), "I watched the youngster there" (p. 38), "Thus, a propos of Jim, I had a glimpse of the real Brierly" (p. 57), "I had them both under my eyes" (p. 57), "Then it was that our glances met" (p. 57), "I watched him" (p. 58), "[...] never taking my eyes off him. To watch his face was like watching [...]" (p. 59), "I looked at him curiously" (p. 62), "I saw him before my eyes [...] I watched him covertly" (p. 76), "he would appear to my staring eyes" (p. 104), "I looked at that absorbed smooth face" (p. 140), "My eyes followed his movements, but what I did see was not [...] I saw only the reality of his destiny" (p. 165).

Marlow looks so intently at other people, and often covertly as if spying on them, because he wants to understand them and, through them, to understand human nature and himself. Very often, when Marlow and Conrad's other narrators look at others, they see themselves. This relationship between the observer and the observed creates profound significances in *Heart of Darkness*. In the words of Albert J. Guerard:

Observing Kurtz, and physically wrestling for his body and soul, Marlow can look on our original and savage nature in its nakedness. He can, that is, look into his own deepest self<sup>16</sup>.

Similar relationships exist between several other pairs of characters in Conrad's fiction: the captain of *The Secret Sharer* and Leggatt; captain Brierly and Jim; Jim and Gentleman Brown; the captain in *The Shadow Line* and Burns, Heyst and Jones in *Victory*. The mysterious link between the characters, based on various degrees of identification with the other,

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>16</sup> A. J. Guerard, *Introduction* [in:] J. Conrad, "*Heart of Darkness*" and "*The Secret Sharer*", The New American Library, New York-Toronto 1950, p. 15.

is very often presented in terms suggestive of seeing mirror reflections. The Passage in *Heart of Darkness* in which Marlow, thinking about Kurtz, stands in front of the door of the dead man's "Intended" and sees, instead of his own reflection, that of Kurtz in the smooth surface of the door, shows how high the degree of identification can be:

I rang the bell before a mahogany door on the first floor, and while I waited he seemed to stare at me out of the glassy panel – stare with that wide and immense stare embracing, condemning, loathing all the universe<sup>17</sup>.

The intense gaze of Mrs Travers at Immada in *The Rescue* also suggests the mirror reflection nature of the contact between the two characters and the self-examining attitude of one of them:

Mrs Travers fixed her eyes at Immada [...] and she looked at her as one looks into one's own heart with absorbed curiosity, with still wonder, with an immense compassion<sup>18</sup>.

Conrad's preoccupation with the motif of the double self or mirror reflections of self has been amply discussed by the novelist's critics. Donald C. Yelton, for example, writes the following:

The theme of psychic *dédoublement* is recurrent – we may even say an obsessive – theme in Conrad's fiction. It is a critical commonplace that, in *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow's confrontation with Kurtz implies a confrontation with self. [...] Viewed from a certain angle, Burns in *The Shadow Line* and Gentleman Brown in *Lord Jim* appear as "double" figures, the projection of some dark psychic content which the protagonist confronts as though confronting a fragment of the self. [...] There are many passages in Conrad in which this fissiparous quality of the self is hinted at by the device of the man who confronts his image in a mirror<sup>19</sup>.

Apart from perception and examination, looking and seeing usually involve direct or implied judgement. If Jim resents being stared at by Marlow and other people during the trial, it is exactly because he is painfully aware of their judging attitudes. Jim "stood elevated in the witness box, [...] and from below many eyes were looking at him out of dark faces, out of white faces, out of red faces, out of faces attentive, spellbound [...]; the audience seemed composed of staring shadows", full of "the attentive eyes whose glances stabbed"<sup>20</sup>.

Even when there is no direct suggestion of judgement or evaluation in the mentions of the eyes of onlookers Conrad often manages to give the impression that a silent weighing of meaning and value takes place in the

<sup>17</sup> J. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth 1983, p. 117.

<sup>18</sup> J. Conrad, *The Rescue, A Romance of the Shallows*, J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd, London 1949, p. 140.

<sup>19</sup> D. C. Yelton, *Mimesis and Metaphor. An Inquiry into the Scope of Conrad's Symbolic Imagery*, Mouton, The Hague, Paris 1967, p. 273, 274.

<sup>20</sup> J. Conrad, *Lord Jim...*, p. 27.

course of seemingly indifferent observation as when for instance Brown and Jim are watched by the natives of Patusan:

At last Brown threw himself down full length and watched Jim out of the corners of his eyes [...]. The houses in view were silent, as if a pestilence had swept them clean of every breath of life, but many invisible eyes were turned, from within, upon the two men<sup>21</sup>.

The unknown intention of eyes that look in silence makes a powerful impression on Marlow, who makes a record of it in his account of his first encounter with the East in *Youth*:

And then I saw the men of the East – they were looking at me. The whole length of the jetty was full of people. I saw bronze, yellow faces, the black eyes, the glitter, the colour of the Eastern crowd. And all the beings stared without a murmur, without a sigh, without a movement. They stared down at the boats, at the sleeping men [...]<sup>22</sup>.

A disquieting atmosphere is often created by references to eyes that watch as if with a hidden purpose. We remember how Marlow watched Jim "covertly"; Brown looked at Jim "from the corners of his eyes", and Burns in *The Shadow Line* gave the captain "side glances". Willems in *An Outcast of the Islands* is followed and watched by natives, and Nina in *Almayer's Folly* is under close surveillance kept by the jealous Taminah. A lot of secret watching and following goes on, naturally, in *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes*.

The eyes of the observers as well as of those observed appear, as a rule, "inscrutable"; Conrad frequently uses adjectives such as "inscrutable", "profound", "impenetrable" to describe the eyes of his observers whose inner worlds are complex and inaccessible. Perhaps there is nothing much to see behind the "fishy eyes" or "dull eyes" of the German skipper and the "indifferent glazed sunken eyes" or the "glassy eyes" of the chief engineer in *Lord Jim*, but the dark profound eyes of Kurtz's Intended seem to hide more than just trust and guilelessness and Jim's "impenetrable" eyes appear to reflect complexities that Marlow cannot fully understand. It is with a good reason that the eyes of Jim's beloved Jewel make Marlow think of a deep well; he was fascinated by "the big sombre orbits of her eyes, where there seemed to be a faint stir, such as you may fancy you can detect when you plunge your gaze to the bottom of an immensely deep well. What is it that moves there? you ask yourself. Is it a blind monster or only a lost gleam from the universe?"<sup>23</sup> Many questions in Conrad's fiction remain unanswered just like this one, and the effort to penetrate the mystery of other people – unrewarded. Frequently one looks at others only to find eyes staring back at one.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 291.

<sup>22</sup> J. Conrad, "Youth" [in:] "Youth. A Narrative"; "Heart of Darkness"; "The End of the Tether", J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd, London 1967, p. 40.

<sup>23</sup> J. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, p. 232.

The awareness of the presence of watchful eyes in Conrad's presentation of human relationships is intensified by the writer's use of images of non-human eyes looking at people. Usually it is the sun, sky, stars and other remote natural entities that appear to be observing man. Seldom do they direct kindly glances at people; and so the sun that looked down benignly at the sleeping Dain in *Almayer's Folly* "dipped sharply", when he sat up, "as if ashamed of being detected in a sympathizing attitude, and the clearing, which during the day was all light, became suddenly all darkness, where the fire gleamed like an eye"<sup>24</sup>. As a rule nature observes man in an impassive, detached way.

The image of stars looking down upon people may not appear very original, but it has a special significance as a part of Conrad's larger scheme of meaning. Conrad refers to them as "watchful stars" (e.g. in *Lord Jim*, p. 21) or "attentive stars" (*The Rescue*, p. 89) that are distant, silent and apparently uninvolved in what goes on beneath them. His characters often feel uncomfortably aware of the universe gazing at them and it is this feeling that the narrator of *The Secret Sharer* conveys in his description of the starry sky:

The tide of darkness followed on swiftly; and with a tropical suddenness a swarm of stars came out above the shadowy earth, while I lingered yet, my hand resting lightly on my ship's rail as if on the shoulder of a trusted friend. But with all that multitude of celestial bodies staring down at one, the comfort of quiet communion with her was gone for good<sup>25</sup>.

A similar uncomfortable sense of being watched creeps into the description we find in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*:

A multitude of stars coming out into the clear night peopled the emptiness of the sky. They glittered, [...] more intense than the eyes of a staring crowd<sup>26</sup>.

There is perhaps a suggestion of a hidden menace in the kind of silent, but persistent surveillance especially when accompanied by a sense of being surrounded or crowded in. In *The Rescue* the brig on the calm mirror-like surface of the sea appears to be hypnotized into immobility by the staring eyes of the islands:

To the south and east the double islands watched silently the double ship that seemed fixed amongst them<sup>27</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> J. Conrad, *Almayer's Folly* [in:] "*Almayer's Folly*" and "*Tales of Unrest*", J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd, London 1947, p. 168.

<sup>25</sup> J. Conrad, *The Secret Sharer*..., p. 20.

<sup>26</sup> J. Conrad, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* [in:] "*The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*"; "*Typhoon*"; "*Amy Foster*"; "*Falk*"; "*Tomorrow*", Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth 1975, p. 35.

<sup>27</sup> J. Conrad, *The Rescue*..., p. 28.

And in *Youth*, when the crew of the *Judea* finally arrived at an Eastern port, the "East looked at them without a sound"<sup>28</sup>.

When human suffering is involved, the impassive watchfulness of the universe may appear cruel as it does to the crew of the *Narcissus*: they toil and struggle against the dangers of the sea while the sun stares at the seamen and their ship "with a burning, round stare of undying curiosity"<sup>29</sup> and it continues watching them also when, after a night of hardship, they are completely exhausted (but determined not to give in):

Mr Craighton, on his back, and very pale, muttered, 'Well done', and gave us, Jimmy, and the sky, a scornful glance, then closed his eyes slowly [...]. The sun was setting. A sun enormous, unclouded and red, declining low as if bending down to look into their faces. The wind whistled across long sunbeams that, resplendent and cold, struck full on the dilated pupils of staring eyes without making them wink<sup>30</sup>.

What seems to be nature's lack of compassion and cruelty is, in fact, an absolute absence of involvement, total unconcern. There can be no doubt, however, of the malice in the watchfulness of wilderness and darkness as described by Marlow:

And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was a stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect<sup>31</sup>.

The magnificent savage woman, Kurtz's mistress, personifies the strange attraction and mystery of the wilderness. Marlow and other "pilgrims" stand still, fascinated and spellbound, looking at her while she looks at them "without a stir, and like the wilderness itself, with an air brooding over an inscrutable purpose". And yet, at the same time, "the wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterius life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul"<sup>32</sup>.

That there is a deeper meaning in the watchfulness of the universe is made clear by Conrad's direct reference to the fact that it is associated with "the inner truth". In view of what is at the core of all things "the mere incidents of the surface, the reality – the reality", tells us Marlow, "fades. The inner truth is hidden – luckily, luckily. But I felt it all the same; I felt often its mysterious stillness watching me at my monkey tricks just as it watches you fellows performing on your respective ropes [...]"<sup>33</sup>.

<sup>28</sup> J. Conrad, *Youth...*, p. 41.

<sup>29</sup> J. Conrad, *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"...*, p. 35.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38, 39.

<sup>31</sup> J. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness...*, p. 66.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

Also the two women whom Marlow sees in the waiting room of the Brussels office, clearly personify forces more powerful than human. They, too, have the peculiar qualities of Conrad's non-human observers: detachment, silence, apparent unconcern, secret knowledge and mystery. Marlow gives the following account of the impression they made on him:

In the outer room the two women knitted feverishly. [...] The old one sat on her chair. [...] She glanced at me above her glasses. The swift and indifferent placidity of that look troubled me. Two youths with foolish faces and cheery countenances were being jolted over, and she threw at them the same quick glance of unconcerned wisdom. She seemed to know all about them and about me, too. An eerie feeling came over me. She seemed uncanny and fateful. Often far away there I thought of these two, guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall, one introducing, introducing continuously to the unknown, the other scrutinizing the cheery faces with unconcerned old eyes<sup>34</sup>.

The accumulation of such references to watchful eyes that look from beyond in order to scrutinize people who are in precarious positions on their "respective tight-ropes" cannot but lead one to suppose that the possible intention of the scrutiny is to evaluate and judge human endeavour. The supposition will be confirmed by the passage from *The Secret Sharer* in which the captain reflects on the sea voyage he and his ship are about to undertake:

In this breathless pause at the threshold of a long passage we seemed to be measuring our fitness for a long and arduous enterprise, the appointed task of both our existences to be carried out, far from all human eyes, with only sky and sea for spectators and judges<sup>35</sup>.

The idea of man being scrutinized and judged by forces external to the human world contradicts the implication of Conrad's image of the universe as a kind of knitting machine knitting people in and knitting people out of existence. It also undermines the validity of the view that "there is no felt religious dimension" in the novelist's work<sup>36</sup>. Conrad's inward complexities and often opposing tendencies result in occasionally contradictory implications of his work. The novelist's view of divine power cannot, therefore, be explained in unequivocal terms. Leon Seltzer, for example, who has given some attention to the problem, avoids direct explicit statements when he writes that an examination of Conrad's work "should make obvious his profound doubt in a benevolent Deity – or, for that matter, in any deity at all" and that the novelist "was unable to detect humanity in heavenly forces governing man's fate. In his view, whatever God there was had

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>35</sup> J. Conrad, *The Secret Sharer...*, p. 20.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. H. Blamires's entry on Conrad in: *A Guide to Twentieth Century Literature in English*, Methuen and Co. Ltd, New York 1983, p. 58.

somehow relegated His tasks to an impersonal universe, which performed them with neither intelligence nor compassion"<sup>37</sup>. Perhaps the most penetrating study of the problem has been produced by Józef Ujejski, who argues that although Conrad never accepted the formulas of any variety of Christian religion, or of any other system of beliefs, he did believe in God even if he was sceptical about God's benevolent interference with human life<sup>38</sup>.

The frequent mentions of eyes watching and judging man create an impression that there are supernatural forces taking interest in human affairs. Conrad himself strengthens the impression when he says in the "Author's Note" in *Almayer's Folly*:

I am content to sympathize with common mortals, no matter where they live; in houses or in tents, in the streets under a fog, or in the forest behind the dark line of the sea. For their land – like ours – lies under the inscrutable eyes of the Most High<sup>39</sup>.

Although man seems to be under constant scrutiny, no guidance, support, or spiritual comfort are given to him. If there is an ideal order of things, he has no direct access to it and so must create his own moral order and choose his set of values: he can only hope that they will correspond with the putative ideal ones; he can have no certainty that his moral choices made according to the guidelines of his own make, are correct. Conrad's pessimism consists in his conviction of the essential moral meaninglessness of the universe, uncertainty and fragility of man's order imposed upon chaos, and inscrutability of the "Most High".

Man cannot fully understand and possess the world of nature and it seems to have no need of him – the unwelcome intruder. Stein makes a comment on this cosmic plight of man:

Sometimes it seems to me that man is come, when he is not wanted, where there is no place for him<sup>40</sup>.

The captain from *The Shadow Line* shares Stein's suspicion; he says:

As I emerge on the deck the ordered arrangement of the stars meets my eyes: unclouded, infinitely wearisome. There they are: stars, sun, sea, light, darkness, space, great waters; the formidable work of Seven Days, into which mankind seems to have blundered unbidden or else decoyed<sup>41</sup>.

<sup>37</sup> L. Seltzer, *The Vision of Melville and Conrad. A Comparative Study*, Ohio University Press, Athens 1970, p. 21, 22.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. J. Ujejski, „Conrad i świat” [in:] *Wspomnienia i studia o Conradzie*, ed. B. Koc, PIW, Warszawa 1963, p. 338–367.

<sup>39</sup> J. Conrad, *Almayer's Folly...*, p. viii.

<sup>40</sup> J. Conrad, *Lord Jim...*, p. 159.

<sup>41</sup> J. Conrad, *The Shadow Line...*, p. 179.

One is tempted to ask: where from? And is this blundering into the universe and groping in the dark ever since a punishment? A test? Or both? The eyes that look at man make one believe that he is indeed tested and judged according to incomprehensible criteria; it is important not to fail the test and deserve a favourable judgement, but one cannot hope to know for certain the rules according to which the sentence will be passed.

Conrad's concern with man's moral choices acquires a central position in his work largely because his characters are viewed and judged from various perspectives: cosmic, social and interpersonal and individual. Because the characters watch and strain their eyes to see truth and, at the same time, are aware of being watched and scrutinized, this concern with moral problems becomes an intense almost physical presence. The characters cannot be certain of what they discover about the world, other people and themselves, and they do not know much is observed of them, but they continue to look for answers. And because they have themselves only to rely upon in this undertaking, they are utterly lonely, but at the same time, because they are constantly watched and judged – they are never alone.

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#### PERCEPCJA WIZUALNA JAKO MOTYW I ŚRODEK LITERACKI PROZY JOSEPHA CONRADA

Josephowi Conradowi bardzo zależało na tym, by jego czytelnik mógł, dzięki odpowiednim technikom literackim, widzieć świat opisywany. Sposób patrzenia i postrzegania świata często przybiera szczególne i wielorakie znaczenia w jego prozie, która, w pewnych zwłaszcza utworach, obfituje we wzmianki, sytuacje, metaforyczne obrazy i aluzje dotyczące tego tematu.

Postaci Conrada z napięciem przyglądają się sobie i innym, usiłując dociec prawdy o człowieku w ogóle i o sobie. Są też obserwowane (i oceniane) przez innych ludzi, a także przez sprawiający wrażenie obojętnego wszechświat. Fakt ten wzmaga poczucie, że bohater Conrada stale podlega moralnemu osądowi nie tylko autora i czytelnika, ale także innych postaci oraz nie nazwanego ściśle przez Conrada absolutu, z którym kojarzy się wspomniana przez pisarza „prawda wewnętrzna”, istota wszechrzeczy.

Zagęszczenie obrazów i aluzji wytwarzających to wrażenie wpływa na intensywność moralnego zaangażowania prozy Conrada. Jego postaci samotnie dokonują wyborów moralnych, nie pozostają jednak bez świadków.